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William Whyte, *Redbrick: a Social and Architectural History of Britain's Civic Universities*; Oxford University Press (Oxford, 2015), 416 pp., incl. 50 b&w ills; ISBN: 9780198716129; £65.00

Reviewed by Alistair Fair

In 1966, the architect Philip Dowson reflected on university architecture, a type of building with which he was developing considerable familiarity on the basis of recent commissions at Oxford, Cambridge, Loughborough and elsewhere:

We have to provide a framework within which this organism of individuals can evolve. It will be as varied as the people that compose it, it can be no single thing, or series of things – certainly no monument. To live, it must encompass a host of activities, but ultimately it must have a wider identity of its own (*RIBA Journal*, 73.3, March 1966).

Dowson's argument – that the university is more than a building, or a set of buildings – resonates in William Whyte's engagingly written and meticulously researched new study, *Redbrick*. Billed as 'a social and architectural history of Britain's civic universities', the book has a significantly wider compass than might be assumed from its title, which derives from *Redbrick University*, written in the early 1940s by 'Bruce Truscot' (in reality, the linguist Edgar Allison Peers) about the new foundations that had emerged during the late nineteenth/early twentieth Century in Britain's expanding industrial cities. Instead, it is concerned with what Whyte terms a 'civic' university – that is, virtually everything that isn't Oxbridge (or one of the historic Scottish universities), and ranging in date from the early nineteenth century to the present day.

Whyte suggests that the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a new kind of university. At the start of the century, England had universities only at Oxford and Cambridge. (Scotland was slightly better endowed, with universities at St Andrews, Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Aberdeen). By 1914, however, this number had more than quadrupled, and there was also a growing number of university colleges and technical institutes. The new institutions were, Whyte argues, typically less insular than Oxbridge. They were more attuned to the needs of an industrialising society, and were the products of local patronage and philanthropy (and also, significantly, state support). They were more engaged with the city in their architecture, and they pioneered new disciplines. They appealed to those excluded from Oxbridge by virtue of background, interest, religion, and, by the 1870s, gender. Nor were they merely 'English', with there being new foundations across Britain and Ireland. Whyte cites the 1920s Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, who claimed that they would in the future be seen by historians as evidence of a Renaissance.

Yet the civic universities, for all their attempts to re-frame the institution in modern terms, have been largely ignored by historians. It is true that the new universities of the 1960s have been discussed by Stefan Muthesius, who has considered their architecture within an international context, while some (such as Manchester) have been the subjects of institutional histories. However, Oxford and Cambridge have dominated elsewhere; the former has an eight-volume 'official' history, the latter has four volumes, and there have been several architectural studies of both. Whyte's claim is that the architecture of the 'civic'

universities needs to be studied and contextualised not only to restore the balance, but also on account of the persistence of the ideas that they represent.

The argument that the pre-1914 redbricks informed subsequent developments is perhaps the book's most contentious. Take, for example, the new post-war universities. Their out-of-town campuses contrast with the city-centre sites of their redbrick predecessors, and, whereas the pre-1939 civics had presented an image of the grand public building, now post-war universities took on quite different architectural forms, deploying the languages and structures of post-war Modernism, and sometimes being planned in looser, potentially more flexible ways. In the process, the 1960s universities acquired their own epithet, 'plate glass'. They also seemed to echo aspects of Oxbridge in their conception and planning. Sussex, for example, suggests the influence of Basil Spence's then recent experience of Queens' College, Cambridge, for which he had designed the Erasmus Building. Its centrepiece, Falmer House, is organised around a courtyard in best Cantabrigdian fashion, with massive concrete arches and vaults supplying the gravitas to anchor the rest of the campus. When Hugh Casson acclaimed the results, Spence replied that he appreciated such praise 'in these days of Universities like hospitals or technical colleges' (Edinburgh, Historic Environment Scotland archive, MS 2329/ENG/52/2/146, letter from Basil Spence to Hugh Casson, 16 May 1963). Similarly in a letter to Spence in 1963 (*ibid.*, MS 2329/ENG/52/2/87, 6 November 1963), another architect, Bryan Westwood, contrasted the university's buildings with CLASP, the lightweight prefabricated system used for numerous contemporary schools and at the contemporaneous University of York:

The buildings reminded me, in this age of CLASP, how important the old-fashioned quality of grandeur really is. Walking around, I felt forcibly that in this kind of building education, as opposed to mere technical training, really has a chance to take place.

York, meanwhile, despite its CLASP buildings, was organised on collegiate lines, just like Oxbridge. However, Whyte's argument is that in reality the trappings of Oxbridge were but a veneer; for example, the 'colleges' were versions of the halls of residence adopted earlier in the century by the civic universities. Perhaps more significantly, he suggests the new foundations were conceived in the same spirit of innovation and modernity that had characterised the nineteenth-century universities, and they embodied a similarly inclusive intent. The 1960s ethos, exemplified by the Robbins Report of 1963, was to admit to university all who were thought likely to benefit from it – admittedly still a small proportion of school leavers, but one which was generously supported by public finance.

Whilst recognising architecture's formative role in giving an identity to the university and its transformative potential in, as Spence put it, helping the student 'over the threshold into manhood or womanhood' (see John McKean, in *RIBA Journal*, 82.10, October 1975), Whyte is interested in more than buildings alone. He draws on vast array of sources to consider how these buildings were used and received by men and women. *Redbrick* is thus ultimately a history of ideas and the realities in which buildings exist. It follows in the footsteps of such classics of social-architectural history as Mark Girouard's *Life in the English Country House*, the buildings that it discusses interesting Whyte not so much as

examples of form, planning, style or structure, but rather for what they reveal of conceptions of the university, and for the ways that they were received. In this respect, Whyte shows how that the frequently high-flown visions of academics and administrators have been punctured by the users of these buildings, and by their subsequent histories. He has an eye for a good example. There are tales aplenty of leaking roofs, collapsing buildings, unfinished masterplans, and revolting students. John Summerson in 1968 counselled the University of Leicester that 'one should celebrate quickly' on completing a new building 'before the rain starts to come in'. While such examples contribute to a narrative that is frequently humorous, Whyte has serious points to make both about architectural history as a discipline (which he frames in broad terms) and the university (which, though conceived as a vehicle for transformation, has not always been successful in promoting egalitarianism). If all this sometimes means that the 'social' history of the university – or, indeed, its administrative history – dominates the account at the expense of purely architecture discussion, the result nonetheless reminds us, as Dowson recognised, that the university is as much a community as it is a set of buildings, the one supporting the other.